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ABSTRACT

Successful performance on the California High School Proficiency Examination (CHSPE) gives high school students the option of leaving school early with the equivalent of a high school diploma. After two years and eight CHSPE administrations, the number of participating students remains low. Possible reasons for this are given, including lack of publicity about the CHSPE, and student opinion that staying in school is preferable to the alternatives associated with early exit. Although CHSPE impact upon the state was, therefore, small, state funding based upon average daily attendance was reduced by approximately five million dollars. Interest in the precursors of educational policy formation led to a study of high school organization and management. A nationwide survey of 2,000 public and 600 private high schools indicates that a great variety of nontraditional courses are offered in a number of schools; that alternatives such as work experience and remedial programs exist to meet the needs of different students; and that some high schools in every state offer early graduation or proficiency examinations. The author suggests that a better knowledge of school programs prior to policy formation, and awareness of new programs' effects on equity might result in more appropriate expectations for educational policy. (GDC)

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THE SELECTIVE APPLICABILITY OF EDUCATION POLICY: THE CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION, ETC.

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National Institute of Education

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A paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, Canada, March 1978

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The Selective Applicability of Education Policy: The California High School Proficiency Examination, etc.

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One aim of the California High School Proficiency Examination (CHSPE) was to find a way to provide broader options in secondary education. For "the bright but bored", the "not-so-dumb" and "not-so-docile" the successful completion of the test offered the promise of a swift exit from high school. The whole program was premised on the notion that high school had little to offer certain students and that they would be better off with the opportunity to pursue their future "careers" with a head start rather than languishing unnecessarily until high school graduation.

After two years and eight administrations, there is no CHSPE groundswell. Students did not flock to take the examination and those who did were not a representative cross-section of the high school population. The paper discusses possible reasons for low student participation. Using data from a national survey of high schools it also points out that many schools across the country may not be as programmatically limited as most critics think.

Such results suggest that better knowledge of school programs and student needs prior to policy formation would result in more appropriate expectations for education policy.

The Selective Applicability of Education Policy: The California High School Proficiency Examination, etc.

Susan Abramowitz
National Institute of Education

The original motivation behind the California High School Proficiency Examination (CHSPE) was to find a way to provide broader options in secondary education. For "the bright but bored", the "not-so-dumb" and "not-so-docile" the successful completion of the test offered the promise of a swift exit from high school. The whole program was premised on the notion that high school had little to offer certain students and that they would be better off with the opportunity to pursue their future "careers" with a head start rather than languishing unnecessarily until high school graduation. Successful completion of the examination guaranteed a certificate legally equivalent to a high school diploma and entitled the holder to be admitted to the state's two-year public colleges. Those wishing to enter the state college or university system would still have to satisfy course or grade-point-average requirements in addition to having the proficiency certificate or diploma.

To date, the CHSPE is two years old and has been administered eight times. On the first two rounds, of the approximately 670,000 eligible 16 and 17 year olds, 12,150 participated in the first administration and 45% passed. 18,500 took part in the second administration, but only 37% passed. In 1976, the legislature broadened the statute so that adults,

18 years or older, are eligible to take the test. For recent administrations, test participation has stabilized at an average of around 10,000.

Florida has also moved toward the establishment of a similar program by allowing sixteen year olds and fourteen year olds with their parent's permission to take a competency test. After considering what sort of examination might be used, staff in the Florida Department of Education decided rather than develop their own test, to rely on the General Educational Development test (GED), which is used in many states as a qualifying test for high-school diplomas awarded to persons completing Adult Basic Education program. The GED is a battery of tests in a variety of subject areas developed and normed by ETS under policies set by the Office of Educational Credit of the American Council on Education (ACE). The first administration of the GED as a measure of competency in Florida will be Fall 1978.

This idea of an early exit program has finally hit the Northeast: Connecticut plans to initiate a program which would allow high school students sixteen or older to earn a proficiency diploma with the passage of two different examinations. One of the tests to be used is the GED; the second is a new Adult Performance level test which the American College Testing Program is developing for the State. As soon as the legislature appropriates the money the State Department will be able to implement the program.[1]

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[1] Edward B. Fishe, "Connecticut Drafts 'Early Out' Program," New York Times, January 8, 1978.

The concern about proficiency examinations is not confined to the states. Several commissions on secondary education have recommended early exit from high school as one of a wide ranging set of proposals for the reform of secondary education.[2]

Given this growing interest in early exit from high school contingent on successful completion of a proficiency examination, the National Institute of Education decided to study the impact of California's early exit legislation to determine the program's effect on the education system. For example, how would a program such as CHSPE affect school finance and organization? Would it engender competition for students among secondary and post-secondary institutions? Would potential dropouts and those aliented from school prefer remaining in school in the hopes of passing the proficiency examination? Would the existence of CHSPE result in a more efficient use of resources at both the state and local level? How successful would financial incentive structures, such as those established by CHSPE, be as instruments of secondary education reform? Since this was the first trial of a State initiative to alter school leaving laws, we thought there would be wide interest in learning the answers to such questions. California and other States contemplating similar initiatives would be interested in the political history and implementation of the new law, as well as its effects on individuals and institutions.

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[2] James A. Coleman, et.al., Youth: Transition to Adulthood; John Henry Martin, et.al., National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education; B. Frank Brown, et.al., The Reform of Secondary Education: A Report to the Public and the Profession. For a critique of these reports, see Michael Timpane, et.al., Youth Policy in Transition.

Our speculations about CHSPE's potential effects knew no bounds. If large numbers of students passed the CHSPE and opted to leave high school it was certain to result in changes in California's school finance provisions and in the organization and incentive structure of institutions serving the 16-18 year old age group. It could also have a far-reaching effect on community resources and quite obviously would have major consequences for youth faced with critical career choices for probably the first time in their lives.

School districts in California rely on financial support from the State calculated on the basis of average daily attendance (ADA). After three decades of unparalled growth, many school districts are experiencing declining elementary school enrollments. Over the next four years these enrollment declines will begin to appear in secondary schools. A further erosion of ADA might have been expected to occur if secondary school students exercised their option to leave school at an earlier age.

We also speculated as to how the impact of the CHSPE might be felt at the individual school level. On one hand while CHSPE may offer dropouts and college-bound youth a proficiency certificate, the basic behavior patterns that characterize both groups might not change at all. If only a small number of students opt to exit early from high school (for whatever reason), then effects of CHSPE on school systems would be hard to find. On the other hand even if few students made use of CHSPE, secondary education decline in conjunction with CHSPE induced decline might produce an effect that CHSPE alone would have been powerless to engender.

If it were likely that a large number of students were to exit or were schools to become wary of such a possibility, then one can imagine a range of possible scenarios. For example, school districts might provide incentives to schools to alter their programs to better suit the remaining population, to retain youth 16-18 years old, or to attract new clientele.

Programmatic change, however, might be constrained by the availability of financial and staff resources. If districts were constrained by financial resources, we expected to see them demand additional State or Federal support. If resources for staff training became constrained we expected to see an increase in the need and demand for staff development beyond that envisioned for a stable and older teacher cohort. Alternatively the loss of ADA could result in fewer programs and the elimination of expensive courses (e.g., those with small classes).

The prospect of losing ADA revenue also could provide incentives for change for individual schools and teachers, independent of any district pressure. Similarly, the students' incentives to attend school could change. Since adolescents passing the test would no longer be obliged to remain in school, their decision to do so might result in increased motivation. It also could create a consumer group powerful enough to demand that unmet needs be better served by the high school. Thus schools might have incentives from both within and without to change the content, scope and ultimately the attractiveness of their program.

With these questions in mind, we funded the Office of Research and Evaluation in the California State Department of Education to compile a social-political history of the legislation and to produce a monograph reporting on the implementation of CHSPE during its first year of existence. The results of their report are somewhat intriguing in that our speculations were in no way supported by the State's results.[3] First, and foremost, there was no CHSPE ground swell. Students did not flock to take the examination. And those who did were not a representative cross-section of the general high school population. Most CHSPE participants were white and attended regular daytime high school.

Student lack of interest in CHSPE may have been due to lack of knowledge about CHSPE. High schools certainly did not go out of their way to broadcast the program's existence. The most commonly used methods of informing students about CHSPE were information posted on bulletin boards, the school newspaper and sessions with counselors. This lack of interest on the school's part was certainly reinforced on the district level. In most districts, knowledge about CHSPE was minimal at most. Initial apprehension about the program had given way to a total lack of concern about CHSPE's potential effects. The State, however, didn't do so poorly: according to one set of calculations, there was a net savings of approximately five million dollars to the State's general fund, in apportionments that would otherwise have been made to local schools.

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[3] William Padia, "The California High School Proficiency Examination: Examinee Characteristics and School Districts Response," a report prepared for the National Institute of Education, February, 1978.

But there is another possible reason why CHSPE didn't attract a wider audience. Students on the whole probably were just not interested. This supposition was suggested to us by a group of researchers at the University of California at Berkeley. The Berkeley group, under contract to NIE, has begun interviewing California high school students to determine how they go about making decisions about their education and what they plan to do after high school.

The results of Berkeley's preliminary discussions suggest that a great many adolescents like being in school-surprising as this may seem. One of the main reasons for this is that high school is where their friends are. As one says "The only difference between community college and high school is that in high school you can eat lunch with your friends." School then is an important social event for adolescents, even for the dropout/pushout types, who hang around stairwells playing cards.

The Berkeley researchers also report that the teenagers they have interviewed are slightly risk averse. One girl explained that if she attended summer school for two summers and took extra courses each semester she could graduate early as a junior with a regular high school diploma. She knew that the diploma would gain ready acceptance; she was not quite sure what having a certificate of proficiency would buy her.

Students had other concerns as well. They seem to have bought the line about "what they need for college." CHSPE might let them out of high school, but it wouldn't help them take and pass all of the courses they need in order to get into college.

And last there is the problem of what one does after leaving early from high school. A majority of CHSPE passers do not go right on to college. Current labor market conditions do not exactly provide an incentive for youngsters to leave the security of high school especially if the only jobs they can find are those they can have while remaining in school.

These anecedotes suggest that the conceptions policy makers have of adolescents may be off the mark or appropriate for only a small group. That is not to say that a public policy like CHSPE is unnecessary or invalid. Obviously several thousand high school students have been interested enough in the examination to spend ten dollars to take it. And of the approximately forty percent who pass each administration, at least half leave school. The public policy issue then becomes, is it worth the State's while to provide this kind of option given the admittedly limited, yet real interest in being able to leave high school early with a proficiency certificate?

Both the State's results and Berkeley's exploratory work suggest that the establishment of CHSPE may have been based on questionable notions about high schools in general and high school students in particular. This, of course, is not surprising. There certainly is a plethora of sterotype and common wisdom about high schools which a dearth of data has no way of offsetting.

Most observers of high schools believe that they are bureaucratic institutions housing authoritarion teachers and alienated students. Critics also contend that such an institution is incapable of meeting the needs of the clientele it serves; students are leaving the 12th grade functionally illiterate; another segment gets shoved out; and few weather the transition between school and work as well as they might. Part of the reason critics give the high school less than passing marks in doing its job, is that they perceive it as an institution trying to do too much and therefore doing very little well.

A desire to be more knowledgeable about the organization and management of high schools as a precursor to policy formulation led NIE to undertake a systematic study of how high schools are organized and managed. We surveyed a national stratified random sample of 2000 public and 600 private schools. Basically we wanted to know whether or not standard notions of bureaucracy were valid descriptors of high school organization and whether or not high school programs were as unidimensional and inflexible as critics contend.

The results were nothing short of amazing, especially for those concerned about implementing reform on the secondary level. One the basis of public school principal reports we found the following:

- Standard notions of bureaucracy - a functional division of labor, a definition of staff roles as offices, a hierachical ordering of offices, and a well defined set of rules governing organizational maintenance and operation - are inappropriate descriptors of high school structure.

- o high schools can better be characterized as "loosely coupled organizations" in which everyone does his/her own thing and the behavior of various actors goes uncoordinated.
- o high schools provide students with a variety of courses which cater to students with varying needs.

This last point is especially relevant to the topic at hand. Schools have a somewhat traditional core curriculum consisting of twelve different courses: the sciences (biology, chemistry and physics), mathematics, foreign languages (Russian and Latin) and practical courses (homemaking, business education, automobile mechanics and wood or machine shop). Sixty-eight percent of the schools in our sample offer between ten to twelve of these courses.

We were also interested in the types of more non-traditional courses high schools offer. Table 1 illustrates the percent of schools offering classes in less traditional subject areas. Social Science offerings in sociology, anthropology or psychology and consumer education courses are by far the most common.

Not only do the schools offer a range of courses, they also allow students to receive credit in a variety of ways (see Table 2). Slightly more than half the schools offer from one to three of these different credit options, the most common being off campus work experiences, inde-

pendent study projects and correspondence courses.[4] At least eighty percent of the schools provide one to five of these alternatives.

To probe further about whether or not schools cater to a set of diverse needs, we asked principals about courses geared to students of different abilities and problems (see Table 3). Almost two-thirds of the schools offer remediation courses as well as allow students to graduate early. Although a fifth of the schools offer none of these programs, almost 50 percent offer one or two; close to 80 percent offer from one to five of these types of need related courses.

This is not to say that these provisions are universal. Probably academically oriented students have more options provided for them than those heading toward the world of work. For example, slightly over half of the schools provide no job placement or dropout prevention services with only a third of the schools providing one or the other.

While program diversity in high schools is more widespread than commonly thought, regional and locational differences exist. The Krushal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance test was run to determine whether the ranking of schools differs when they are classified into different groups. If the populations from which these groups were drawn are the same, no group should be very different from another in terms of the sum of

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[4] Dr. Scott Thompson, Director of Research, The National Association of Secondary School Principals believes that the surprising finding about the existence of such a large number of high schools which give students credit for correspondence courses is due to the fact that many high schools have a small number of students who cannot attend school and who participate in the large university based correspondence programs.

ranks with groups. Table 4 lists the program variables by region (north, south, east, west), location (urban, rural, suburban), and size (small (1-750), medium (750-1500), large (1500-6000)) and indicates with a plus the variables which differ across levels within a category. In all but two instances there are significant differences in these program variables depending on the part of the country a school is in, its urbanity and its size.

The regional variation can be demonstrated by examining the percent of schools in each State which offer either early exit via an examination or early graduation or both. Except in the South (where over half the participating schools sampled in a slight minority of States offer these programs), at least three-fourths of the States in each region have more than fifty percent of their respondent schools offering either or both of these two methods to get out of school early. At the time when our survey was administered, only California allowed early exit with proof of proficiency or competency. Tentatively, it seems as if many districts and/or schools in other States have implemented such programs without an initial State mandate. Our results underscore the fact that the array of diversity among schools and districts is significantly more extensive than a State level analysis would show. Even though a pattern clearly emerges within States, not all schools and/or districts conform to this pattern.

TABLE 1

Percent of Schools in High School Survey Offering Various Non-Traditional Courses

	PERCENT OF SCHOOLS
Sociology, Anthropology, or Psychology	77
Consumer Education	60
Family Life Education	36
Career Exploration	28
Environmental Studies	27
Ethnic Studies	17
Values Clarification/Moral Education	7
Women's Studies	5

TABLE 2

Percent of Schools in High School Survey Offering Various Alternatives for Earning High School Credit

	PERCENT OF SCHOOLS
Off-Campus Work Experience or Job Training	65
Independent Study Projects	59
Correspondence Courses	52
Night or Adult School	42
Credit by Contract	24
Credit by Examination	18
Community Volunteering	15
Travel	8

TABLE 3

Percent of Schools in High School Study Offering Courses Which Meet Divergent Needs

	PERCENT OF SCHOOLS
Remedial basic skills	66
Early graduation	65
College advanced placement	40
Job placement service	36
Individually paced learning	23
Dropout prevention program	19
Diagnostic-Prescriptive education	11
Bilingual program	11
Early exit via examination	10

TABLE 4

Program Variables and the Effect of Location, Region and School Size

	Location	Region	Size
Ability Grouping	+	+	+
Remedial reading and math	+	+	+
Instruction for special needs	+	+	+
Traditional courses	+	+	+
Non-traditional courses	+	+	+
Credit alternatives	+	+	+
Number of grading systems	+	+	+
Schedule alternatives	-	-	+

TABLE 5

Percent of Schools in High School Survey from Each State With Either or Both Early Exit by Examination or Early Graduation by Region

East	Percent	Midwest	Percent
Connecticut	78	Illinois	77
Delaware	50	Indiana	75
District of Columbia	100	Iowa	60
Maine	81	Michigan	53
Maryland	95	Minnesota	68
Massachusetts	68	Missouri	53
New Hampshire	75	Nebraska	41
New Jersey	42	North Dakota	25
New York	85	Ohio	74
Pennsylvania	39	South Dakota	27
Rhode Island	44	Wisconsin	78
Vermont	67	Kansas	71
West Virginia	54		

South		West	
Alabama	28	Arizona	88
Arkansas	32	California	99
Georgia	88	Colorado	56
Kentucky	35	Idaho	83
Louisiana	92	Montana	3
Mississippi	58	Nevada	100
North Carolina	26	New Mexico	33
Oklahoma	45	Oregon	80
South Carolina	80	Utah	25
Tennessee	60	Washington	6
Texas	49	Wyoming	100
Virginia	64	Hawaii	67
Florida	85		

Conclusion

In his discussion about the implementation of competency legislation across the country, Chris Pipho said "While the wave of legislation looks like a single trend nationwide, at the State level it more closely represents a trelis with forces and counterforces all trying to make changes, while the existing governance and political structures continue to grow or just hold on to the status quo"[5] and so our results seem to show.

While one state has implemented proficiency legislation and two states are on the verge, schools and districts across the country have been doing their own thing in terms of implementing early graduation and exit programs. Does this mean state intervention to provide broader options for adolescents is really unnecessary? And if not, what are the consequences of enacting a state-wide program? What form should a state-wide program take? What balance should be struck between areas for local control and state control in a state-developed program?

The answer to these questions depends in large part on the nature of the population participating in these programs, something about which we know very little. An informal program run locally might attract a different clientele than a program based on a state proficiency examination. For example, a school based program may have considerable more flexibility

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[5] Chris Pipho, "Minimal Competency Testing: A look at State Standards," Education Leadership, April, 1977.

and could be arranged to meet the needs of various individuals. When a test is used as the criterion, minority and poor youth usually do less well. We know from the California experience that minority youth are under-represented as CHSPE participants. This may be due to any number of causes: lack of fee, lack of information, disinterest, fear of tests, etc. Whatever the reason, it behooves policy makers to realize that the kind of option being provided may only be a real option for a narrow segment of the population.

The results of California's experience with the proficiency examination suggest that the public conception of student needs requires fine tuning. It also suggests that policy makers become aware of the consequences new programs have for equity. Participation in the various options offered may need to be monitored to determine whether or not broader equity goals are being met. And last, the NIE research results suggest that better knowledge of school programs prior to policy formation might also result in more appropriate expectations for education policy.